

2026-2027

EARLY LEARNING CENTRE HANDBOOK

Working Learning Acting TOGETHER



**INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL of TIANJIN**

Working Learning Acting TOGETHER







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Welcome to IST's Early Learning Centre

An Introduction to the Early Learning Centre and Early Years Programme at IST

Research from around the world shows that for children to reach their full potential, both intellectually and socio-emotionally, they need to be stimulated and exposed to developmentally appropriate and engaging learning experiences in their earliest years. IST's Early Learning Centre (ELC) and Early Years programmes are purposefully designed and fully accredited to realize exactly this promise.

Our ELC caters to children between the age of two years nine months and five years who are embarking on their journey through these critical foundational or 'Early Years' of learning. For many children this marks the first transition from home to group experiences outside of the family and to a new and exciting learning environment. It is our mission to ensure that your children's first steps into life-long learning take place in a safe, supportive, and stimulating environment.

The beliefs and values that drive our mission to provide an outstanding education for the children of the international community here in Tianjin are formalised in our school motto: **Working, Learning and Acting TOGETHER for our common future.**





Working together

At IST, we appreciate that you know your children best, and a positive transition from a home-based to a school-based learning environment requires that we foster a partnership, where parents, teachers, and children work closely together. We strive to guarantee the best possible experience for young learners and welcome and encourage parental participation in all areas of our ELC programme. By working together, we can ensure that your child's unique learning needs and wellbeing always come first.



Learning together

Our students love to learn, the foundations of which are centered upon the guarantee of high quality teaching and learning, beginning in the Early Years. Underwriting this guarantee is our school's hard-earned status as a fully authorized International Baccalaureate World School. The IB Primary Years Programme (IB-PYP), offers an internationally acknowledged and celebrated curriculum continuum and educational framework for children between three and eleven years of age. In recognizing that the Early Years constitutes a special and unique developmental stage, IST offers the PYP's 'Early Years' curriculum to our youngest learners. It is an engaging and holistic learning programme and experience, specifically developed to foster socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive

development. Our ELC teachers and programmes deliver a broad, balanced curriculum through play-based learning, that promotes self-esteem, encourages curiosity, and develops problem-solving skills, discovery, and exploration.



Acting together for our common future

As an international community of learners, our ultimate goal is to work together and take action to safeguard the futures of our children and of our planet. Our Early Years programme therefore guides and encourages young children as they learn to respect and take responsibility for themselves, for others, and for the environment. It is our shared responsibility to empower children with not only the academic and intellectual skills needed to experience learning success, but also with the values, attitudes, and dispositions that will enable them to work together with others to make our world a better place, now and in the future.



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CORE FEATURES OF OUR EARLY YEARS PROGRAMME PHILOSOPHY & CURRICULUM



Learning programmes and experiences in our ELC are guided by our school philosophy, by the IB-PYP curriculum framework for the Early Years, and by building strong **RELATIONSHIPS** with children and their families. Our ELC teachers foster and support learning by carefully planning for the many varieties of **PLAY**, by creating and maintaining safe, stimulating, and responsive **LEARNING SPACES**, and by offering frequent opportunities for **SYMBOLIC EXPLORATION AND EXPRESSION**.

PLAY

High quality learning in Early Years settings require that children have multiple opportunities throughout the school day to experience different types of play. Transdisciplinary learning experiences across all areas of the curriculum, such as, Math, Language Arts and Unit of Inquiry are supported through Free Play, Guided Play, Direct Play, and Games.



- **Free Play** is led by the children, and they decide when and what to play. Teachers enter the play but are careful to respect the children's decisions. They are mindful to support the play, but not lead the play
- **Guided Play** is child-led but is guided by the teacher as a way to support and extend learning
- **Direct Play** is teacher initiated in order to teach a specific skill or concept
- **Games** are used by teachers to support specific dispositions, such as turn taking and sharing



Teachers in the ELC support all types of play, by ...

- demonstrating that they value what the children are doing
- actively entering the play to extend the children's current vocabulary and knowledge
- entering into the different play scenarios to model behaviours that support the children as they build resilience, learn to share, problem solve, and take turns
- critically observing the children's emerging thinking processes, interests, and theories, and responding in ways that purposefully extend their learning
- offering differentiated and scaffolded learning experiences for individual students and small groups
- explicitly modeling and reinforcing the development of the IB 'Approaches to Learning'

Play also offers authentic opportunities for young learners to begin their exploration into and development of the IST Learner Outcomes, eleven cognitive and affective learning dispositions that guide the development of both academic and social learning competencies.

RELATIONSHIPS

Genuine, affective relationships are essential if we wish to establish the trust, sense of belonging, risk-taking and personal agency that is necessary to support new knowledge, skills, and learner dispositions. Teachers and teaching assistants in our ELC encourage and nurture positive partnerships between the home and school, and within the classroom community, to provide a strong basis for learning and behaviour, and for the health and well-being of all children. The ELC team actively engage and connect with individual children throughout the day by having conversations, listening attentively to, and helping them find answers to their questions and inquiries, and by acknowledging their efforts and achievements.

Our Early Learning Centre (ELC) is staffed by a highly qualified, experienced and dedicated team of Early Years teachers and teaching assistants. In accordance with international guidelines, IST maintains a minimum teacher to student ratio of 1:14, as well as a minimum adult to student ratio of 1:7. Our ELC typically caters to between 25 and 30 children, and maintains a deployment of two to three teachers and two to three teacher assistants.

LEARNING SPACES

The environment has long been referred to as the 'third teacher'. A stimulating and inviting indoor and outdoor learning environment is a central element of high-quality learning in the Early Years. It involves the creation of safe spaces that promote exploration, wonder, creativity,



risk-taking and learning through play. Together with the children, the teachers co-construct a wide range of indoor and outdoor learning experiences in response to the interests and inquiries of the children. The ELC team continually work together to create engaging spaces that support high quality learning. Examples include ...



- offering a range of open-ended materials
- arranging and rearranging equipment, materials, and artefacts as provocations for learning
- creating areas for role play, block play, mark-making, expression through the arts
- considering a range of choices and opportunities for group and individual play
- involving students in the design and construction of play areas
- creating displays that reflect the process of student learning

Play-based learning is most effective when children are able to pursue their interests across a range of environments, both indoor and outdoor. At IST we have world class facilities that were purposefully designed and built to meet the developmental needs of our students. Within these learning spaces students have access to a choice of learning resources and materials, age-appropriate technologies, and play and construction equipment. The ELC comprises two very large self-contained classrooms (150m² each) catering to our KG1 and KG2 students. The classrooms are connected by a third shared room (60m²) that houses general amenities, including a kitchen, dining tables, and bathrooms and handwashing facilities.

Our ELC has an extensive and secure garden and learning space (750m²) with trees and outdoor play and construction equipment. The outdoor environment provides learning experiences that cannot be replicated indoors. The outdoor environment extends learning beyond the classroom, and provides opportunities for open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery, and connections with nature. Our outdoor environment offers students greater access to space and freedom for sustained periods, to enable them to engage in more vigorous physical activities, to develop both fine and gross motor skills.

Note: General OECD guidelines for minimum student to usable space ratios stipulate approximately one student per 3m² for usable indoor learning spaces (IST provides at least 8m²) and 7m² for outdoor learning spaces (IST provides at least 20m²).



SYMBOLIC EXPLORATION AND EXPRESSION

The development of understandings in language and mathematics are purposefully interwoven and intentionally explored through a range of interest-based experiences. These learning experiences directly support and influence later formal learning. Teachers use activities and strategies where children learn language and mathematical concepts through play, including ...



- math and literacy games: alphabet puzzles, bingo
- rhymes, poems, stories, books: high quality and culturally diverse literature
- play: water and sand, playdough
- conversations: role play, inquiry discussions
- mark-making: drawing, painting, cutting, pasting
- problem-solving, reasoning: puzzles, provocations to support unit of inquiry
- counting, patterning, and sequencing: beads, manipulatives, counters
- building and construction materials: blocks, Lego, Mobilo



AGENCY AND THE LEARNING COMMUNITY



Our ELC team actively promote student **AGENCY**. Children are encouraged to use their initiative, **VOICE** their interests and wonderings, make **CHOICES**, and take responsibility and **OWNERSHIP** for their learning. Children are given opportunities to develop a strong sense of self-identity and self-belief, together with an awareness that the values, needs and opinions of others contributes to an authentic learning community.



APPROACHES TO LEARNING

Our ELC team are also active participants in developing the IB's 'Approaches to Learning', which relate to children's thinking, research, communication, social, and self-management skills. Team members listen to, respect, and respond to the children's ideas by planning and creating learning spaces where they can freely access materials, make choices, and take risks. We purposefully enter the learning spaces to support and extend the growth of the ATL's by asking a variety of open-ended questions while children are at play.

Approaches to Learning (ATL's): Examples of questions that support your child's learning during play				
Thinking Skills	Research Skills	Communication Skills	Social Skills	Self-management Skills
- I wonder what would happen if you ...? - I wonder why you chose ...? - Why do you think ...? - How do you know ...? - What do you think made this happen?	- I wonder what would happen if you ...? - How can we find out more about ...? - What do you think will happen next?	- Can you tell me about what you are doing? - What happened when you ...? - How could you share your learning with ...? (e.g., talking, drawing, writing)	- Can I do anything to help? - Can I join you? - How could ... help you solve this problem? - What would ... do in this situation? - When you have finished with the ... can ... have a turn?	- What might be another way to solve this problem? - Is there another way to try this? - What might be your next step?

UNITS OF INQUIRY

Children in our ELC also inquire into and learn about globally significant experiences in the context of four Units of Inquiry per year. The units are developed with the needs of our young learners in mind and act as a vehicle through which key content, skills and dispositions are explored. These are examples of units in KG1 and KG2.

KG1 Units of Inquiry			
An Inquiry Into: <i>Who we are</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>How we express ourselves</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>How the world works</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>Sharing the planet</i>
Central Idea: Awareness of ourselves helps us to grow as learners. Lines of inquiry: - Who I am - Things I can do - Building my learning skills	Central Idea: Through play, we express our feelings and creativity. Lines of Inquiry: - Ways we play - Creative use of toys and materials - Expressing ourselves through play	Central Idea: Discoveries we can make using our senses. Lines of inquiry: - Our senses - How we use our senses - My discoveries	Central Idea: Animals and people interact in our shared environments. Lines of inquiry: - Animals we interact with - Where we interact with animals - Our responsibility towards animals in our shared environments



KG2 Units of Inquiry			
An Inquiry Into: <i>Who we are</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>How we express ourselves</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>How the world works</i>	An Inquiry Into: <i>Sharing the planet</i>
Central Idea: The choices we make influence our relationships.	Central Idea: Imagination can be expressed through ideas and creativity	Central Idea: Properties of materials determine their use.	Central Idea: Plants support life on Earth.
Lines of Inquiry: • Choices we make • How our choices connect to others • Building positive relationships	Lines of Inquiry: • Ways to express our imagination • Expressing my ideas and creativity • Appreciating the imagination of others	Lines of inquiry: • Materials we use • Properties of materials • Ways we use materials	Lines of inquiry: • Different kinds of plants • How plants contribute to life on Earth • Caring for plants

SPECIALIST CLASSES

In addition to the myriad of learning experiences that take place in the ELC classrooms, children in the ELC also attend additional enrichment classes in specialist subject disciplines.

KG1 specialist classes occur in the ELC, while KG2 classes occur in the specialist subject classroom.

- Music (x2), Physical Education (x2), Library (x1), World Languages (x3)



HOMEWORK

There is no Homework in the ELC. However, we encourage you to engage with your child in a wide variety of experiences such as, outdoor experiences (e.g., visiting a museum, going to park, riding a bike) and to join in their play (e.g., building with blocks, cooking, Lego, construction materials, role-play, drawing, colouring and painting). Regularly engaging your child in conversation, reading, singing, and reciting rhymes and verse is fundamental in developing strong literacy skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking. Helping your child to build life skills, such as, dressing, packing their own bag and toileting, will give your child greater independence at school.

APPLICATIONS, ADMISSION AND PLACEMENT



We welcome applications from all international families who meet our admissions criteria and who embrace the school beliefs and values as expressed in our school Motto and Philosophy. All families are invited to visit our friendly campus and meet with members of our leadership and admissions teams. We will provide you with an introduction to our school and programmes and host you on a tour of our Early Learning Centre (ELC) and campus. Once an application package is submitted – including Forms A, B, C, E and F and copies of both the child's and the parents' passports, a final admissions decision will be made. Applicants to our ELC do not need to submit past school records.

The Early Years are distinctive from the Elementary Years. It is important that we do not compare one child to another, in these formative early years, as each child experiences different rates of development in the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic domains. The ELC Team recognizes that developmental progression is unique to each child and therefore, it is important that we work in partnership with you, the parents, to set realistic expectations for your child to succeed as a learner.

Grade placement in our ELC is based upon each child's age on September 30 of the current school year. However, because research indicates that socio-emotional maturity positively influences longer term learning and wellbeing, we will consider placements one year level lower if we believe this is better suited to your child's current level of maturity and readiness. Conversely, research also indicates that advanced placement is not beneficial to the longer-term academic and social wellbeing of children. Consequently, advanced placement in the Early Years beyond policy guidelines will not be considered.





EARLY LEARNING CENTRE (non-compulsory pre-school)			ELEMENTARY (PRIMARY) SCHOOL (compulsory)		
Nursery		Pre-Kindergarten	Kindergarten KG3	Grade 1	Grade 2
KG1a	KG1b	KG2			
Admission from 2Y9M AND turning 3 after 30 September	Admission from 2Y10M AND turning 3 by 30 September	Admission from 3Y10M AND turning 4 by 30 September	Admission from 4Y10M AND turning 5 by 30 September	Must have completed KG3 or equivalent	Must have completed Grade 1 or equivalent
EXAMPLES OF NATIONAL SYSTEM EQUIVALENTS					
UK	Foundation Stage 1 (FS1)	Reception (FS2)	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
France	Petite Section	Moyenne Section	Grande Section	CP	CE1
Korea/China/Germany		Kindergarten/Krippe		Class 1/Grade 1	Class 2/Grade 2

IST ADMISSION POLICIES

General Admission

Students shall be placed in grade levels by age. The cut-off date determining grade placement shall be September 30. The minimum age for admission shall be two years and nine months. Children must be 3 years of age by September 30 of the current academic year to be placed in KG1b (Nursery 1b); 4 years of age by September 30 to be placed in KG2 (Pre-Kindergarten); 5 years of age by September 30 to be placed in KG3 (Kindergarten).

Early Admission

Students who are 2 years and 9 months and fully toilet trained may join the half day KG1a class. However, to immediately join the full-day KG1b programme students must turn 3 years of age by September 30. Students who turn 3 years of age after September 30 but before the commencement of the second semester will be placed in KG1a (Nursery 1a) but may join the full day KG1b program for the second semester. All students must turn 4 years of age by September 30 of a given academic year before they are subsequently placed in the KG2 (Pre-Kindergarten) programme for that year.

GENERAL INFORMATION RELATED TO THE DAILY OPERATION OF OUR EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

The following information is provided to support our partnership in working closely together with you, in order that your child experiences the best possible start to their early learning years in our ELC.

HOME SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

IST is a friendly place, with our ELC supporting an Open Door policy. We actively seek to build a partnership with you through regular communication, including welcoming you into our classrooms and play spaces.

At IST we use Toddler, a digital platform to showcase learning and as our primary means of communication between home and school. We use the platform to message you and to share general information about school life and upcoming events and activities. We will also post regular examples of your child's school experiences and learning so that you can view and comment on your child's learning journey through the Early Years. Upon admission each parent is provided with the information needed to access your child's learning at home, to send and receive messages, and to invite other members of your family so that they can keep in touch with your child's school experience back in your home countries.

You can also communicate with us in the following ways:

- by visiting our classrooms and attending school activities and events, including Parent Teacher and Student Led Conferences (held at the end of the first and third quarters)
- by emailing or messaging us to share news, ask questions, or to schedule a more formal opportunity to meet with us to discuss your child
- by telephoning the school office to arrange a time to meet (2859-2001)



Note: IST teachers and Teacher Assistants do not use WeChat to communicate with parents.

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE FROM SCHOOL

It is important for your child to arrive before the official start to the school day at 8.10AM. The time from 7.50AM until 8.10AM allows the children time to get organised to start their school day (e.g., unpack their bag, communicate if they have school lunch or home lunch, etc.) It is also a time when children strengthen their social skills by building relationships with their peers.

- 7:50AM Children are welcome to enter their classroom
- 8:10AM The official school day starts
- 8:20AM Specialist subject classes start
- 12:00PM The half-day program ends – Nursery only (K1)
- 3:15PM Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday - school finishes
- 2:15PM Wednesdays – early school finish

DROP OFF AND PICK UP PROCEDURES



Your child's safety is of paramount importance to us at IST. When dropping your child off at school (either by private driver, or by other family members), please bring them to the front of the Qin. If you are not present to escort your child to the ELC, a bus ayi or staff member will accompany them.

Your child can be collected from the ELC at the end of the school day or the bus ayi or an ELC staff member will escort children to their buses or to the Qin Building to meet private drivers or family members. Please try to ensure that your child knows who will be picking them up and from where they will be collected. Please share this information with the ELC team.



SCHOOL BUSES

Parents (or designated adults) are responsible for ensuring that children are accompanied to and collected from their bus stops at the designated time. A school bus ayi will greet parents/caregivers at these times, and will supervise the children while they are on the bus. The school bus ayi will escort your child to the ELC in the morning, and collect them again at the end of day. Parents are asked to notify the school transportation liaison (Tracy Feng) of any changes to your child's schedule, via the given bus route's designated WeChat group.

ITEMS TO BRING TO SCHOOL – Please clearly label all items (where possible)

Please ensure that your child brings the following to school every day ...

- a water bottle
- a morning snack (optional, IST provides a light snack)
- a home lunch (or order a School Lunch)
- a backpack big enough to easily hold your child's daily belongings. Please note that if your child's backpack is too small, it is very difficult for them to manage their belongings

We encourage children to take responsibility for their own belongings; please help us by encouraging your child to help pack, unpack, and carry his or her own backpack, where reasonable

CLOTHING – Please clearly label all items

We encourage the children to be as independent as possible in regard to dressing and undressing. We will provide additional help if needed.

Please help by ...

- providing 1 or 2 spare sets of clothing to be left at school in case of accidents (e.g., toileting, water play)
- changing spare sets clothes according to the season. These clothes are kept at school
- encouraging your child to dress themselves (e.g., have velcro shoes rather than laces)
- supporting your child in knowing how to dress, using appropriate seasonal clothes (e.g., scarf, hat, etc.)

TOILETING AND HYGIENE

Children entering the Early Years need to be toilet trained and largely able to take care of their own toileting needs (e.g., pull clothing up or down, wiping, flushing). We understand that toileting accidents can happen, and we will help clean and change your child when necessary. If your child is regularly having accidents at school, we will discuss this with you and come up with a plan together.

Please help by encouraging your child to ...

- communicate when they need to use the toilet. Those new to English could practice "toilet please".
- wash their hands (e.g., before they eat, and when going to the bathroom, after playing outside)
- use a tissue to blow and clean their nose and manage a sneeze
- cover a cough by coughing into their elbow rather than hands

MEALS AND REFRESHMENTS

IST provides free daily school lunch and a healthy afternoon snack for all children in the ELC. Parents are asked to provide a snack for morning tea. Parents can also send a lunch from home if they do not wish to use the school service on a given day (refrigerators and microwave ovens are available to store and reheat food). Menus for each two-week period can be accessed through the Blaze newsletter or online using the school website.



KG1 students eat their snacks and lunch in the shared kitchen area. KG2 students eat their snack in the shared kitchen area, and lunch in the cafeteria later in the year as they prepare to move to Kindergarten (KG3). During lunch and snack time, your child will be encouraged to independently eat their meal, and will be supported if needed. If your child has specific dietary requirements for health, religious, or other reasons, please let our teachers know.

You can support our efforts at school by ...

- showing your child how to open and close their water bottle and lunch/snack boxes
- encouraging your child to eat independently using utensils (spoon, fork, chopsticks). By this age children should not expect to be 'spoon-fed' by their family members and aiyis

BIRTHDAYS

We are happy to celebrate your child's birthday at school. We ask that you please don't send gifts or additional treat bags. Please see your homeroom teacher to organise a time.

You can celebrate by:

- sending in a cake, or cupcakes, or cookies to share with the class
- joining the classroom celebration (typically during morning snack time)

If your child has a party outside of school, we ask that you manage invitations and celebrations independently and not hand them out at school to avoid the possibility of upsetting classmates if all are not invited.



SICKNESS AND ABSENCES

If your child is unwell and unable to attend school, please inform our ELC Team by an email, by telephoning the school office (2859-2001), or in person on the day, preferably before 8.10AM. If your child will not be catching the school bus, please notify the bus routes WeChat group. Please also notify us when your child is set to return to school, especially given any special health related considerations that may need to be attended to. IST asks that children who have vomited, not return to school for 24 hours.

Children Who Become unwell at School

If your child becomes unwell at school the school nurse will contact you. It is expected that an unwell child will be collected from school within a reasonable time period.

Infectious Diseases

If your child has a transmissible illness, please advise us as soon as possible. Your child should not attend school during the period of convalescence stipulated by the school nurse and/or other relevant health authorities, such as your child's doctor. In most instances involving infectious diseases, a doctor's certificate and clearance upon arrival at school by the school nurse, will be required to re-enter the ELC.

Accidents in School

Minor accidents and incidents are an inevitable part of school life. If your child does have an accident or incident, they will be cared for by the school nurse. All incidents requiring assistance are noted and recorded. Parents will be informed of incidents only if it is deemed to be necessary. Children who hurt their heads are always taken to the nurse for further observation and parents notified.

REST TIME (KG1 ONLY)

Children have rest time for 1 hour every day. The aim of rest time is to provide the children with enough time to reenergize so they can best continue their learning for the remainder of the day. Parents can choose for their child to sleep or have quiet play. A comfortable mat is provided at school and parents are asked to bring a blanket and small pillow if they wish their child to sleep.



OUTSIDE PLAY AND AIR QUALITY INDEX (AQI)

Children are encouraged to play outside in our beautiful outdoor learning environment on a daily basis, weather permitting. If the AQI reading is more than 200 the children will remain inside where the air is filtered and closely monitored.

SAMPLE ELC SCHEDULE - THIS IS A FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE. THE PERIODS OF UOI, LITERACY AND MATH ARE FLUID, WITH THE UOI BEING INTEGRATED, WHERE POSSIBLE, INTO ALL AREAS OF LEARNING.

KG1		Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	8:10-8:25	Greeting/Unpack bag/Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI				
1	8:25-9:05	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI				Assembly or Learning Centres
2	9:05-9:45	Library	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI			
	9:45-10:05	Snack				
3	10:05-10:45	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI	PE	PE	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI
4	10:45-11:25	World Languages	Music	Music	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI
	11:25-12:00	Lunch				
5	12:00-1:00	Sleep/Quiet Play - 1 Hour and or /Outside Recess				
6	13:10-13:50	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI				World Languages
7	13:50-14:30	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy,UOI	World Languages	Early Dismissal 14:10-14:15	Learning Centres- Math, Literacy, UOI	
8	14:30-15:10	Snack/Pack up/Story Time			Snack/Pack up/Story Time	
	15:10-15:15	Dismissal			Dismissal	

NOTE: IST has a comprehensive Parent Student Handbook which contains additional important information and policies for all parents of children from Nursery to Grade 12. It is available in hardcopy from the school office, or online and available for download on the school website: <https://www.istianjin.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Parent-Student-HandBook-web.pdf>





INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF TIANJIN

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